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THE MIDDLE SEAT By SCOTT MCCARTNEY

Air-Taxi Services Threaten to Jam Airports

NASA Predicts Las Vegas, Chicago and Dallas Will See Heavy Traffic From Light Jets

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Thousands of new small jets about to hit U.S. skies will likely add hundreds of additional flights each day in big cities like Las Vegas, Chicago and Dallas, leading to airport congestion and flight delays.

Recent research by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration predicts that air-taxi service using "very light jets," a new class of airplanes seating four or five people, including pilots, will have a significant impact on metropolitan airports: Light jets could push traffic at some of them up 25% from today's levels. Airliners with 200 passengers could end up waiting behind tiny jets with just two air-taxi passengers. Delays could happen in the sky too: Faster big planes could be stuck behind slower little ones, just like with interstate traffic on the ground.

The Adam Aircraft A700.

Las Vegas's McCarran International Airport will see the biggest impact from air-taxi service over the next decade, according to the NASA forecasting, with nearly 400 air-taxi flights a day by 2014, a huge jump at an airport that today is near capacity with 1,600 takeoffs and landings daily. Chicago's busy Midway Airport was No. 2 in NASA's air-taxi projections (with 355 flights), followed by Dallas Love Field (with 350).

Several models of very light jets, or VLJs, are currently in flight testing at Eclipse Aviation Corp., Adam Aircraft Inc. and **Cessna Aircraft** Co., and deliveries are expected to begin this year. Several other manufacturers are working on VLJs, and the Federal Aviation Administration expects about 5,000 VLJs to enter service within the next 10

years. Eclipse already has orders for more than 2,300 jets. "I think there is potential for a real congestion bind," said FAA Administrator Marion Blakey. "It's going to be a delicate balancing act."

TAXIS WITH WINGS

The planes, which start at a cost of about $1.5 million, will be the backbone of new air-taxi services. They'll charge about $1.50 to $2 a mile per trip and cater to business travelers eager to avoid airline connections at prices cheaper than big corporate jets, or vacationers willing to splurge for convenience and time-savings. A golfing outing from New Jersey's Teterboro Airport to Hilton Head, S.C., for example, could cost $900 to $1,200 for an air taxi each way, though the price per person would likely be lower with multiple passengers. A first-class ticket from Newark today costs nearly $600 each way on U.S. Airways, but requires a connection in Charlotte.

Air-taxi start-ups and VLJ manufacturers say most of their flying will be from smaller suburban and rural airports that are underutilized, but are often much closer to businesses, factories, homes and resorts. The planes can take off and land on runways about half as long as those big jets require.

But the NASA study, which was completed last fall, showed that air taxis will want to land at some of the same airports already used by commercial jets. Salt Lake City International, Washington's Reagan Airport and San Jose International, for example, turn out to be high on the air-taxi demand list, according to NASA. The study also found that suburban airports like Fulton County and Dekalb-Peachtree, both near Atlanta, Teterboro in New Jersey, Fort Lauderdale Executive in Florida, Centennial near Denver and Sugar Land near Houston will be heavily used by air-taxi jets.

The NASA study crunched census data, income statistics, travel patterns, airline schedules, ticket-price projections, air-space capacity and other data to estimate demand for future travel county-by-county in the U.S. Then researchers compared whether travelers would likely drive, fly commercial airlines or hire an air taxi, based on the cost and time required for each form of transportation, and factoring in safety jitters for some people worried about small planes.

In eight years, 15% of the flights in U.S. skies could be air-taxi jets, the simulation found, carrying only 2% to 3% of passengers.

That could lead to trouble for already congested airports. Clark County Aviation Director Randall Walker was moderating a panel on airport congestion last fall when the NASA research was presented; he was surprised when Las Vegas McCarran, his primary airport, was listed as the top destination for air taxis. "This could be a serious problem. We may have no place for them to come," he says, noting that Las Vegas tourism depends on big planes, not small ones.

To discourage air taxis from using McCarran, Las Vegas would likely raise landing fees for smaller planes and try to push them to nearby airports that cater to private planes. But

no airport is closer to the Strip than McCarran, and neither U.S. airports nor the FAA can administratively ban certain types of planes. So many big spenders hiring a jet taxi may not be deterred by higher landing fees. Still, some industry experts believe that increased delays will ultimately push some air-taxi companies to switch to smaller airports, since customers could be turned off by the waits.

Ms. Blakey of the FAA agrees. "The air-taxi market will adapt to where there is room to fly and where there is room to land," she said.

Wherever the planes land, they also may add to the congestion in the skies between and around big cities. The VLJs can fly at the same altitudes as airliners, and will likely choose to in order to burn less fuel and find smoother air. But they are slower than airliners. So the flight time for a larger jet could increase if it was stuck behind a VLJ.

The FAA believes it may have to push VLJs down to lower altitudes where turboprop planes fly, generally between 17,000 feet and 29,000 feet above sea level, in order to avoid slowing up traffic. In upper altitudes above 29,000 feet, modern satellite-based navigation systems will help with congestion, too, by allowing planes more direct routings without being confined to specific airways. More accurate radar and altimeters allowed the FAA last year to begin allowing planes to fly 1,000 feet apart vertically instead of 2,000 feet. The new policy has doubled the capacity at upper altitudes.

At airports, new technology to let planes fly closer together and enhance bad-weather capabilities at smaller airports should also help relieve congestion. But some technology is still nascent: Ms. Blakey says if proper investment is made now, it will still be 10 to 20 years before the next-generation navigation system is fully operational, replacing most of today's technology with advanced systems that will boost capacity.

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Taxis With Wings

Here are some of the companies planning to offer jet-taxi service late this year or next year:

COMPANY	FIRST REGION	AIRCRAFT
DayJet Corp.	Likely Southeast	Ordered 239 Eclipse 500 jets
Pogo Jet Inc.	Northeast, likely New York area	Deposits on 70 Adam Aircraft A700s
Linear Air	East Coast, likely Boston, New York and Washington, D.C., area	Ordered 30 Eclipse jets